

Matters of State

Gamemaster's Comment: I wanted to start setting the background info for the impending succession crisis and give the player the basic information he'd need for reference in that regard. I also wanted to flesh out Lady Candace, and to put some potential friction in the works in terms of Reinhardt's duties and passions. Nuff said.

Reinhardt's Commentary: The scope of Reinhardt's political responsibilities are evident here. It was nice to develop the relationship with his mother. Moreover, I am having to solidify his feelings for Elsbeth when challenged on a logical level. The mission for the peasants is like a fork in the road, will Reinhardt send others or go himself? I am interested to see how that plays out.

14 Helane 719 - Blood Helane Eve

It was early evening and the sun was just now setting. The Peaceful Boar was aglow with the vibrant red-orange hues of the sky. Master Donnal was busy before the hearth blowing a peat fire to life. He had lit a lamp and placed it on the table nearest the hearth, where Baron Maddox sat with his mother, Lady Candace, and her ladies maid, Anna Triel. His other guest, Dame Savra Cerl, had retired a few minutes before, stating that she would, in accordance with the custom of her Order, arise at midnight for a period of meditation and then awake the dawn.

Supper had gone well. Reinhardt had arrived in a black mood, but put on his best face, and after a time, he found the company of women, and a meal that bordered on a banquet, had put him in better spirits. His mother's light and easy banter had been far defter than its casual manner otherwise implied, and he suspected she had deduced, at least in general, what ailed him. Anna had been giddy and girlish and talked of nonsense, but in a charming way. The girl had a disreputable head for wine. The hippocras had made her very giddy. And then there had been Dame Savra, who was blithely cheerful, but seemed cut from a different cloth entirely.

She had listened with great attention to his account of the taking of the village, asking astute questions only a blooded warrior would ask, and then, with polite interest, sounded out his intentions for the village, the raising of his troop of horse, and his hopes for expansion in the coming spring. She was easy company, but he knew he was being measured in every detail by an expert who missed nothing. It was the woman's crystalline eyes, which were reserved, analytic, and not a little wry. This was not a woman who would be easily impressed.

The one thing they had not discussed was the point of business that had brought her. Instead, conversation, as the remnants of the brede and sautéed river eel were removed, and the tender gooseflesh and Chawettys were served, had moved to anecdotes of cloister life, the nuanced differences between Kaldoric and Melderyni theologians, the chantry of the Order of Sappiran – the most venerable and mysterious of Melderyn's priestly orders – near Qualdris, and the pros and cons of the Order of St. Claudia's bloody crusade against the Solari Tribes in the Osselmarch, which Dame Sophia was known to be a vociferous proponent of, and surprisingly, Dame Savra expressed deep opposition to. There had been no want of talk.

Over another course, a roast suckling pig served beside stewed cabbage in a savory sauce, he had promised to take the ladies on a tour of the village in the coming forenoon, and to show Dame Savra the church and discuss the matter of assigning the benefice. In the days after that he had little doubt they would hunt his woods and survey his domain, all without discussing the offer of a tract of land for her order to build a Chapter House upon. It was the way of things between nobles – especially those

of her strata. Business would come only after they had exhausted the social forms and established a rapport.

Now, as Master Donnal served a fruited custard pie and a dish of quinces baked with honey, cinnamon, and cloves, Reinhardt noticed his mother was looking at him intently, her expression gentle, but serious, and not unconcerned. Master Donnal refilled their flagons with steaming hippocras and withdrew, leaving the trio to their own devices. Anna, who had been chattering along at a manic pace asked, "What of Lady Thilisa?" and Reinhardt realized he had withdrawn into his own thoughts and lost track of the conversation.

"Countess Thilisa," Lady Candace said gently, "is a married woman."

"Many seem to think she's a widow," Anna quipped, but fell silent when Lady Candace shot her a stern look of approbation, and looked sullen, mulling over her wine. But the girl was not wholly wrong. Earl Maleken had left Qualdris almost two years before to hunt down the murderer of his cousin and had not returned. More than a few nobles had begun to consider his wife a potential match, though she had rebuffed all potential suitors. The girl pouted, "She looks like Halea and lives like a nun."

"She lives like a proper wife and a righteous woman," Lady Candace said with affected sharpness. "She is her father's daughter. And Sir Declaen is the most loyal and loving husband in all of Kaldor - the minstrels sing his praise," which was true in that his loyalty and affection for his palsied and blind wife was a fabled thing immortalized in story and song. "And you have the audacity to compare her to the Queen of the Cult Whores and speak low of Holy Orders? You are in your cups!" Lady Candace shoo'd at the girl and made a clicking sound with her tongue, though Reinhardt could tell she was playing a part and little upset. "I am astounded by you. Withdraw at once. Meditate upon the disgrace of your wine."

"The custard," the girl began in protest, but it was clear Lady Candace was having none of it and she fell silent, this time bidding Reinhardt and his mother good evening and disappearing up the stairs. When the sound of the door to Lady Candace and Anna's room was heard, Lady Candace said of Countess Maleken: "She is rare beauty."

It was a statement Reinhardt had heard many a time from men who waxed poetic in overripe prose over the beauty of Countess Fair, who it was regularly asserted the most beautiful woman in all of Kaldor, though Elsbeth was not without her own admirers, Reinhardt among them. Women spoke of her beauty too, which was more convincing, though if she were the most beautiful woman in the Realm, she was also the most reclusive. Educated in Melderyn, Countess Maleken had returned to Kaldor three years ago to marry, and had seldom attended court. Reinhardt himself had never laid eyes upon the woman. He wondered what his mother was driving towards and said: "So I am told."

"But married," Lady Candace said, firmly ending the matter. Her tone softened: "Which brings me to you, my dear son, who have not sealed matrimonial bonds. Bachelorhood is well and good for a household knight, but you are a Baron now and have obligations to your own house and that of your liege. An heir is among them. Any fool can see your hands have been full these past weeks, and I know you have your own mind, but what thought have you put into progeny and patrimony, both of which require a wife?"

Reinhardt said nothing; stayed motionless in his pose of darkened thoughts. Only his eyes moved and met his mother's. Despite her probably believing the opposite, Reinhardt had indeed given thought to his legacy, and who his heir would be. The issue of a wife was constantly in his thoughts as of late. Whether he would sire the next Earl of Neph or Pallon was at the crux of those thoughts. He could not

even think of another woman right now. He could never marry for convenience. The scriptures were clear on a husband's duty, and he would be living in sin, living a lie to marry someone else, but be thinking of Elsbeth, perhaps even consorting with her. It would not be fair to marry another under such pretenses. What ate at him was that Elsbeth had done that very thing. However, he made excuses for her: She was a woman, and a Countess. She could not disobey her father's arrangements. Reinhardt satisfied himself, that it was her father's mistake, not Elsbeth's. Had her station been lower things may have turned out differently. His mother gave him no respite; she was so very keen in these matters of propriety and nobility. He knew this would be the one issue in which they would never agree. She knew quite well the nature of his silence.

"Countess Curo is married too," said his mother softly, but also as a matter of fact, as if she were still speaking to Anna. There was nothing in his vocabulary to counter those five little words. They rode him down like a cavalry charge. They were the heart of the matter, the heart of his personal hell. Part of him did long to have a family. He probably could have a dozen suitors in a heartbeat, especially when he dethroned Pallon as the Realm's jousting champion come the Chelebin Royal Tournament of Chivalry in the spring. Reinhardt had lived the last ten years of his life devoted to one woman, and while she lived, he would love no other. But here was his mother, and these were not the words she wanted to hear or would accept. If Reinhardt played this wrong, over time his mother might begin to resent Elsbeth for Reinhardt's blind love in spite of himself and his possibilities. He needed to give her hope, but delay any commitment:

"This is not a matter that needs decided presently," Reinhardt said, hoping the matter would be deflected until spring. "Even if a likely candidate were found, there are too many issues here for me to oversee before the spring comes."

Lady Candace sipped from her hippocras and looked at her son with a careful eye, and Reinhardt could feel the mettle in the small woman who had birthed him. It was not going to be that easy, he realized. "She will still be married in the spring," Lady Candace said, not missing a single point of emphasis "and even were she not: she was firmly ensconced in her power before her father died; before she was Countess; before she was married. She favors you without a doubt," Lady Candace made a gesture that seemed to encompass all of Nurelia. "But you know when you take the heart's long look that she is more magnate than maid. And that the love of ballads rings false. Romantic love is fickle, and sometimes our hearts desire that which will destroy us. The love that endures is that which is born of good company and respect."

Correct as his mother probably was, Reinhardt still didn't want to think of Elsbeth in that way. He believed in the contrary of his mother's opinion: It was because he saw the Countess as a woman, a maid, and not as a magnate that she cherished him. She was constantly surrounded by people who looked upon her in terms of her title. Even Pallon was more interested in her status than her soul. She carried the burden of leadership day in and day out. Reinhardt saw past it all. He gave her respite. He could always tell when she was wound up tight like a rope. Before her marriage, he would often go to her room, lock the door and take the key, giving her orders and refusing to let the bratty noble's daughter get her way. It became a game, he defied her orders and in the end they would wrestle for the key - not as nobles, but as friends. A smirk formed on his face as he remembered how her eyes would flash when he told her 'no,' a word she was unaccustomed to hearing. There was pent up sexual tension to be sure, but Reinhardt always knew when propriety dictated his exit. He figured that like every other person in the world, she just needed to be loved as a person. His smirk retreated and he curled the corner of one side of his mouth into a frown. Maybe his mother was right, maybe it was not meant to be. Maybe an affair was all he and Elsbeth would ever have, a game.

"If I am doomed to a marriage of convenience," he said. "Then perhaps Countess Maleken is the perfect choice, provided her husband is dead or declared so. We can both truly love someone else,

but fill a need. I would be happy to let her pine for her lost husband, and she may be perfectly willing to let me have my indiscretions as a husband. Neither of us could ask for more convenience in matters of the heart. In matters of the Realm it would make a fine alliance of politics. Moreover, she would not be hounded by suitors expecting more from her than I." It sounded good, but obviously his heart was not sold on the idea.

"My son would not allow himself an indiscretion," Lady Candace said, "Nor would the Lady of whom he speaks. But love can grow if two people want it to." She gave him a weak, apologetic smile and moved to serve the custard and quinces, "I who birthed you in cloister and have lived among an Order both celibate and chaste for your entire life am not one to lecture a young man in the passion of his prime on love. I overreach myself. I will leave the matter of your *duty* for another day."

Reinhardt did not mean to make his mother feel as if she were intruding where he did not wish her to. He decided the time was right to tell her how much he wanted her to with him. "The matter that is most curious to me, mother, is your situation. You have not informed me if you intend on staying on here with me at Nurelia? I need a woman to run my household until the issue of my matrimony has been settled."

"I have come to see to the affairs of the Realm," she said. "And will remain as long as I am needed. It is my duty as your mother, and my pleasure."

"I am pleased," Reinhardt said with a smile. "I am in definite need of your council and skills." He shrugged. "I have no idea how to throw a banquet or stock a proper larder. And the fact that my house is more like a Knight's field camp probably didn't escape your observations."

"Nor those of our distinguished guest," she chided. "But the keep will fall in due time, and if I know Dame Savra as well as I think I do, it will not affect her judgment of you, or her Order's involvement in your domain. She's a shrewd judge of men, and I believe a fair one. She's also ambitious - wants to make her own mark."

"I want our relationship to remain open and forthcoming," Reinhardt said. "Since you will be Steward of the Barony in my absence, I think there are some things that I have done that you should know." His mother raised an eyebrow and settled in as if he finally had something to say that peaked her curiosity; it was likely she expected she would be the Lady of his Baronial House. The notion of being Steward as well clearly intrigued her. "First, I sent a letter to my father," Reinhardt wasn't sure how this news would meet his mother. "I asked for aid in peasants and horses. Father always did have a good eye for horses. I also offered to take on my half-sister if she is not yet married. I figured my halls would soon be filled with bachelor Knights like myself soon."

"Sir Barnabas," Lady Candace answered with diplomatic aplomb. "Is said to spend little time at Whayryn these days; preferring to make the most of the hospitality of friends and Court. Your letter, no doubt, was delivered into the hands of Lady Dura or Gadod."

Reinhardt was not sure if this was a good or bad thing. He knew quite well that Lady Dura was the power at Whayryn - the power that had seen him run off to Abriel Abbey as a boy. It might not matter, he thought. If she was willing to deal, which meant an agreement that heavily benefited Whayryn at Nurelia's expense; it might help him get Nurelia on its feet. Lady Dura was a mercenary woman of the first order. He had little doubt her cooperation could be bought. He could then pay her off and be done with the matter.

"As for Dalla," Lady Candace said. "She was widowed last winter. Her husband, the eldest son of Lord

Chewintin, died of consumption. I understand it was a long death. They had no children. She has lived with her sister-in-law, Lady Harra, in Tashal, ever since. I am told they are frequently seen at the parties of the Bernan Circle." She sighed and fell silent, her expression meditative. Her sister, Reinhardt's aunt, Lady Verahl, had died in a tragic accident two years before when a gust of wind knocked the loose tiles from the roof of Sir Daynes Bernan's townhouse as she left one of his Circle's parties.

Notorious parties, Reinhardt knew, with an eclectic crowd of nobles and wealthy merchants as adherents. Baron Ethasial of Setrew, his uncle, was known to attend when he visited Court, as were many young nobles of high status and impeccable breeding. Ribald entertainment and sheepish apologies between attendees were rumored to surround every event. It was a taboo topic among the mighty, who turned up their noses and sniffed without comment. Elsbeth, despite her reputation for dash and daring, had shunned her brother-in-law's parties. Even Sir Pallon, for all his failings, had almost invariably declined to attend.

"I'll never know what possessed her to attend one of that prattling fool's blasted parties," Lady Candace said of her sister, who Reinhardt remembered as an unpleasant and austere woman who was pious to a fault. He recalled she and her husband, Sir Halan, had spent the decades of their barren marriage in a silent and bitter struggle to obtain moral advantage over one another by ever greater ascetic sacrifice and acts of charity. Polite, generous, and genial with everyone but one another, it had always seemed to him that they had been chained together in a spiteful competition of petty devotions. Sir Halan, after the funeral, had married a woman a third his age who had already given him one child. Another was said to be on the way. "The morrow is her twenty-second month-day," Lady Candace said. "I always light a candle."

Reinhardt nodded solemnly. "Well, I was not sure if your situation with the Cloister would allow you to come to Nurelia on a permanent basis. I thought perhaps that Dalla could keep her half-brother's house and possibly find a husband here. I even went as far to think that Lady Dura might even allow it, being that I am a Baron and all. However, I am glad that my first hope, that you would remain here, has come to pass. If Dalla chooses to come, I will not turn her away. I am sure we could find something for her to do? It was always my feeling as a boy that she was cut from a different cloth than Lady Dura and Sir Gadod."

"I have never met Dalla," Lady Candace answered. "But I am told she is a good hearted creature, though easily led. You could send to her and see if she wishes to reside at Caer Nurel. It would be a generous act to bring her away from Sir Daynes' circle of lost souls, even if the family bonds are less than you might hope."

Reinhardt knew his mother often represented the interests of the Order of the Balm of Joy in Court and was curious of his mother's knowledge on the state of the realm and its nobles. He decided to probe her for some opinions. He sat up formally and said, "Let us have a meeting of state: What is your opinion on the state of the Kings health?"

"Mingath has never been well," Lady Candace said. "It was the reason he was considered a dark horse for the throne in the last Succession Council. If Scina Dariune, Troda's father, and his wife, Princess Kathela, hadn't surprised everyone and backed him I have little doubt Cheselyne - The Elder, of course - would have become Queen. She was only twenty at the time, but she had a great deal of force behind her in the Council. If she hadn't been such a hot-headed fool and stood her ground she might still have won the day. Instead she stormed out and her faction collapsed in her wake. As a result, Mingath, Torastra's despised weakling became King. No one expected him to live this long, or to have such a grip on the throne. How many pronouncements of his final breath have we heard in the last thirty years? Sometimes I think he lives on pure spite." She paused. "But from all reports he

has not left his bed in almost a month. And I understand from Mother Velira that he has sent for Bishop Hadan at Abriel, who he has openly shunned all these years. Perhaps - this time - the rumors are true."

Reinhardt frowned; he didn't really want to get tied up in the politics of Kaldor, but it was inevitable in his new position. He decided to keep on the topic of the King. "Why do you think he had not named an heir?"

"Kings play games," Lady Candace said, which wasn't an answer at all. "If he suspects he will die soon he may remedy that. But he may just leave it in the hands of the Council. He has yet to recognize any of his sons, despite the fact that all are jockeying for the throne. I think he knows none of them would gain the support of enough nobles to maintain the Elendsa's grip on the nation. It would weaken the dynasty. Perhaps he wants to ensure an Elendsa with strong backing is selected and hopes the Council will choose accordingly."

"That seems reckless to me," said Reinhardt. "How do you see the Succession Council voting?"

Lady Candace smiled ruefully and said: "Insofar as Mingath doesn't recognize any of his sons, I think the Council will want a legitimate Elendsa with the best chain of decent possible, and through a male, if possible. But the only such man available is Sir Conwan."

Who Reinhardt knew was not in the running due to an inconvenient oath. The eldest son of Prince Brandis, Torastra's youngest son, Sir Conwan had wanted to marry a Melderyni woman who refused to adopt Kaldoric doctrine. Being in the line for the throne, Torastra's brother Kalabin, then Archbishop of Caleme, had demanded the young man take an oath foregoing the throne. It had been the first major rift between the Kaldoric Church and the Melderyni Synedros, and a controversial one in view of the fact that the Kaldoric Church was not, in fact, a separate religion, and that its Archbishop was answerable to the Melderyni Primate in Cherafir. Yet, the fact remained, Sir Conwan, the powerful Sheriff of Semethshire and one of Kaldor's wealthiest knights - and the only legitimate Elendsa male of direct male descent, remained disqualified.

"There are many who still insist Conwan's the right man for the job," Lady Candace added after a moment. "And I've heard it said his proponents are pressuring the church to nullify his oath, but it seems unlikely. Not with Earl Dariune's brother a Bishop, and Countess Curo related not only to Dame Sophia, but to the Archbishop by her uncle's marriage as well. Both House Curo and House Dariune have solid claims to the throne, made stronger by the fact that both are in positions of great power, and I am certain both will seek to keep him out of the running. But," she said. "Earl Dariune is Mingath's cousin, not a direct descendent of any of Torastra's brood, and Elsbeth, for all her power, is a woman. And the barons remember the power they lost under Chelebin. I think the notion of a Queen would be unpopular. Not so much that Elsbeth wouldn't have a chance, but unpopular nonetheless. And there are others."

"Who?" Asked Reinhardt obviously interested in the future possibilities. He wondered if Elsbeth wanted the throne. His gut told him that she did not, but neither would she refuse it if her duty led her to it.

"Well," she said, pondering. "Most think the Council set a precedent when it passed over Cheselyne the Elder, but she's not given up on the throne, for her daughter at least. And she's not known for her scruples. I understand she is pressing for a marriage between her daughter - Cheselyne the Younger - and Earl Dariune's boy, Scina. That would be a force to content with, but not an unstoppable one. Her nephew Sir Arlin, Lady Larela's boy, is well liked, though he seems more interested in unseating men

with his lance and goosing the ladies than he is with being King. He's a twit, but a popular twit. And I've little doubt some nobles would like him as a weak candidate for the throne. And then, of course, there are the Firiths."

Reinhardt frowned: Baron Osirin Firith, the son of Princess Larena, was a man no one in the Kingdom could take for granted. He was not only the Baron of Kobing, but the Warden of the Osselmarch, the commander of one of the King's armies, and a proven veteran of many battles. He had the advantage of being male, of being respected, and of having the backing of the largest single faction in the council. Yet, the matter seemed far from settled. There was more than one strong claim to the throne. Even if Mingath did recognize one of his sons, the matter would not be certain. "Hmm. It doesn't hurt being at the head of an army at such times," Reinhardt thought out loud. "Who will the church support?"

"I hope you will forgive me for saying so," Lady Candace said, "But the Church will stay on the sidelines unless its interests are threatened. If they do get involved, however, they will back the candidate who strengthens the Church's temporal power and," she looked both fierce and unhappy. "And further alienates the Synedros. It's one of the most divisive issues in the Church Hierarchy. Archbishop Kynne and Bishop Dariune both want to drive the wedge deeper, and they have almost total control of the Order of the Shattered Spear. Mother Verila of my Order and Dame Sophia oppose him in this, of course, and Bishop Hadan is openly in favor of tightening our bonds to the Synedros. I fear that should the Church get involved it will be at war with itself." This perspective illuminated the multiple layers and threats a civil war might contain for Reinhardt. The prospect of multiple noble factions at war entangled with multiple church factions gave him an eerie feeling. He was Elsbeth's vassal, but he was also loyal to the Church. He had always thought of the church as a single entity, clearly it was not. In the case of war, he was already aligning himself even though he had not realized it. His offer to Dame Sophia and the presence of Dame Sevrá was proof to the fact, depending upon how their negotiations concluded. "What do you see as our greatest dangers here in Nurelia?"

"Successions are always dangerous," Lady Candace said. "And they are filled with betrayals. I understand Torastra suspected foul play in the death of his heir, Crown Prince Haldan. And the last succession was not a smooth affair, either. There was great uncertainty in the air, just as there is today. In the absence of an appointed heir, or a will, we are sailing into uncharted waters. And should the council fail or a weak king without sufficient backing be chosen, civil war is not out of the question. Here, on the frontier, you do not have to worry about your flanks as other nobles do. Clan Elendsa have always been shrewd in terms of vassal weakening. But you do have to be concerned with being cut off should House Curo and House Dariune find themselves at odds. Baron Perstiel is your closest neighbor, and sits between you and Gardiren. Indeed, he may be your most immediate adversary should the Council fail."

"What can we do to prepare?"

"I am a woman and will not comment on military affairs," Lady Candace said. "But I will say you need allies: political and otherwise, as many as you can make as quickly as ever you can. If not by marriage, then by other agreements if need be. I think you should do everything you can to engender good relations with my Order and Dame Sophia's, as well as the great noble houses. You are an unknown entity and must become known - in a manner of good repute."

Reinhardt nodded in understanding. His mother had led him to one thing that was certain: his greatest benefit was the fact that he was an unknown. There were no doors closed to him at the moment, save perhaps those at Nausch. Something inside of him stirred that he heretofore had not know; he felt the fear of self preservation, not only for himself but for his family, his mother, and his barony. Was he being corrupted? Was it true that power corrupts? Was he willing to become a

backstabbing politician now; that is what he always thought of the nobles at the King's Court? The past fortnight had caused him to awaken to a new world, one that he had so long been shielded from by Elsbeth's skirt. Why had Elsbeth sent him to Nurelia? Was it that she favored him? "I am one of the few people she truly trusts," he thought to himself. "I have no political ties through lineage. I am not a great risk to betray or oppose her, not like Kural." It was not self delusion, but seemed to fit the facts. "Or, she thinks I am easily manipulated." She was in for an awakening if she thought so. It was time for him to make some decisions not in her best interest, but in his own. It was not, however, that he decided to mistrust Elsbeth or betray her. He simply needed to start thinking not as her Champion Knight, but as her political ally.

This could put him into grey areas or conflict of interest, and then again perhaps not. Currently, Gardiren and Nurelia shared similar goals. However, the magnitude of his possible position was sinking in. He controlled the sapphire mine. He was revolutionizing warfare with Faranir's weapon and armor designs. Elsbeth was shrewd and saw Faranir's designs, but how much did she really know about combat and what this meant if he succeeded? Reinhardt was not sure she saw the entire military picture, she didn't seem too anxious for him to succeed with it. Perhaps, it was due to it being a threat not only to her enemies, but herself. Reinhardt could severely shift the balance of power if he succeeded in making all the rest of Kaldor's arms obsolete. In reality all he needed was men. With the sapphire mine in his control and the only source of the new arms in the country, all he needed was men to build an unstoppable army with which he could crush everyone who opposed him. With the new weapons he could slice through the King's larger armies with fewer forces. He could take the throne for his own, kill Pallon, and take Elsbeth as his queen to legitimize his seat.

He let out a cackle that startled his mother and he started laughing, and she did as well. He kicked the devil from his shoulder and shook his head. "We all have delusions of grandeur," he said. "I guess I am no exception. I was daydreaming like a boy that I was the King." He smiled. "I am sorry if I startled you." Lady Candace gave him a dubious look, the feeling was still faintly locked away in his mind. He had decided he was going to raise more troops that Elsbeth had asked for. He was going to add a squad of Archers and company of Footmen to his lists. He just needed to get more men. "I would be open to any advice you may have on proceeding with my negotiations with Dame Savra. What do you think of the terms I have offered Dame Sophia? I especially need the 20 yeomen and extra peasant families that I requested."

"I think she will take them," Lady Candace said, "A double knight's fee with river access is no small offer. But, I think the peasants will be hard. The Order eight chapter houses, if memory serves, but that doesn't mean they have a surplus of bodies. Twenty fit young men with no household of their own and no wife or children can probably be found readily enough, but giving up whole families - and transplanting them in winter? I think she's liable to quibble fiercely over this point. You might do better to find another source of ready peasants." Lady Candace's eyes narrowed and her voice became conspiratorial: "How daring do you feel, my son?"

He smirked. "Mother, I did not receive my titles by sitting quietly beside the road," he said coyly. "If you have any ideas that could benefit my situation, then by all means I beg you to explain."

"I recommend you take the peasants you need," Lady Candace said with an unrepentant emphasis on the word take. "We do not practice slavery in the East, but we allow those barbaric caravans to pass through our lands from Orbaal to Tharda. The fall caravans will be departing Tashal on the last day of the harvest. Most of these slavers drive their chattel on foot or in wagons. It will be slow going. I doubt they will reach Coranan before the first snows close the gap. The weaker ones usually die in their chains on the road, I am told. I see no reason you should not liberate a straggling slave chain a few days out and liberate them. The Kath often prey on the weaker merchant caravans, and you can offer

them free tenancy and leave their coming to them. It is remote here and they can pass as far as Gardiren in the guise of pilgrims. And there are many Jarin settled around Gardiren. From there few would think much of their travel to Nurelia."

The audacity his mother's mind impressed Reinhardt. It was a daring plan full of risks. However, this bold action could resolve many needs at once. Reinhardt rubbed his chin. The details of such an enterprise swam in his head. It contained many problems and would require large amounts of planning and precision execution in a short amount of time; time was a commodity he had only in precious amounts of at present. Moreover, it would mean mortal danger to his few precious men-at-arms. It created a dilemma of weakening the village defenses and Kural's keepers. It required a transportation plan for getting the peasants from an unknown location to Nurelia. Most importantly, it create a political incident, which would not be the ideal situation for the newest member of Kaldor's elite. Bringing protests from other countries to the King's court was not how Reinhardt wished to be introduced to the King. Still, by wearing no identifying marks and eliminating enemy witnesses it might be done. The more Reinhardt thought about it, the more he liked it, and he had just the perfect man in mind to lead such a mission. Having patiently waited long enough, his mother broke his thoughts.

"As to your offer to the sisters of the Order of the Balm of Joy," Lady Candace said her voice very grave. "It is more problematic. They are not acquisitive as the other orders are and, as you know, the sisters are not merely celibate and chaste, but take vows of poverty as well. I have not, of course, being a mere lay-member, but I live among them and have been one of their principle fund raisers for these many years. The order is very poor despite its benefactors. They never turn anyone away and give most of what they have to others. It can barely maintain the Hospice in Erone, let alone the Monastery of our brothers of the Irreproachable Order in Bromelean. My own cloister only survives because it sits on land owned by Dame Sophia's own chapter house and she sees to its needs personally. Indeed, they are on the verge of ruin because of debt to the usurer Thomas Cuke of Qualdris," Lady Candace's voice became hard and her nostrils flared when she said the man's name, "Because they were forced to take out a loan to repair the roof after last winter's heaviest storm. Mother Velira is considering making a personal appeal to the King for assistance. I have not forwarded your offer to Erone yet, but I fear the matter would simply be beyond their means."

"It is my hearts desire to be known as one of the, if not the, greatest patron to the church among my peers of equal station. Obviously, there are those who have much greater resources than I will probably ever have. Nevertheless, I intend for Nurelia to have a strong church presence. It may take years for things to progress as I would like. I think having the church here will bring stability and growth. I will sponsor the rebuilding of the local church, and the construction costs of the future orphanage if necessary. I would like to be so bold to hope that one day an abbey, cathedral, or even university might stand in this barony. All I will request from your order is people to occupy, administer, and maintain them. Surely raising crops upon donated land for self sustenance is acceptable, even with a vow of poverty? I too plan to live simply when not entertaining for political reasons. This may cause me difficulty in finding a wife who may not wish to live such an austere lifestyle. But, we have covered that matter earlier. Now, as for this Thomas Cuke of Qualdris, how much to the Sisters owe for their roof? Perhaps we can assist them? Coin is not one thing that I have in abundance this year, but perhaps I can offer to assume this debt in exchange for the Orders cooperation? What do you think?"

"Your desire to help the sisters does you credit," Lady Candace said warmly. "But my Order's debt is substantial and you have not fully established yourself here or broadened your privy purse. And you have already taken upon yourself the financing of your man Faranir's new forge, the repair of the church, the construction of barracks and stables; and the raising of this extravagant company of heavy horse - which is quintessentially Elsbeth if I might be so bold - you have been ordered to raise.

No," she said, her expression turning shrewd. "I will recommend Mother Velira petition the King – he has always had a free hand with us. Then you can offer the land. If you offer to help with the construction of a manor house I am sure the sisters can find freemen of sympathy to work the fields. The orphanage can wait until such time as your funds are more in trim."

"As you wish, Mother," said Reinhardt. "I will honor your wisdom and wishes in this matter. I have a propensity to be aggressive and impulsive; it will do me well to have your steady and well thought council at hand. Let us leave it at that. You have given me much to think on, and I am sure you are weary from your travel. I will keep you from retiring no longer." He stood and gave his mother a nod. "I will take my leave and see to a few matters before I retire myself." His mother stood and he took her hand, to kiss it, but instead came forward and embraced her. They stood locked for a moment longer than typical, but not longer than a mother and son might. Then he pulled back and smiled at her.

"Until the morrow mother," he said.

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